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ABSTRACT

The Piedmont Schools Project (PSP) was one of the Experimental Schools Projects awarded grants by the National Institute of Education (NIE). The PSP is located in the Piedmont region near Greer, South Carolina and serves approximately 5,000 K-12 students from eight schools. The students in this region have historically performed at one or more grade levels below the national average on all content areas of standardized achievement tests. Major characteristics of the PSP include community involvement, individualized instruction, the open school, differentiated staffing, affective education, and ongoing evaluation. Two evaluation teams--Level I, which works for and reports to the project, and Level II, which works for and reports to NIE--provide on-site evaluation. This paper describes various aspects of the Level I PSP evaluation: the evaluation team, its responsibilities and activities (which include testing programs, surveys, and reports), and problems encountered. The author concludes that an on-site formative evaluation can contribute a great deal toward the success of an educational program. (Author/MV)

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# LEVEL I EVALUATION IN THE PIEDMONT SCHOOLS PROJECT

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April 1976

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Level I Evaluation
in the
Piedmont Schools Project

## Introduction

The Piedmont Schools Project (PSP) was one of two Experimental Schools Projects (ESP/NIE) awarded grants in the second year of operations. The PSP is located in the Piedmont region of South Carolina and serves the approximately 5,000 K-12 students of the eight schools situated in and around the city of Greer. The PSP students constitute approximately nine percent of the 56,000 students in the district to which they belong. The PSP schools make up one of the five areas which operate within the School District of Greenville County. The other four areas are all larger than the PSP area. Originally, the six Greer elementary (K-5) schools fed one middle school (6-8) which fed one high school (9-12) a closed system. In 1973, however, the second year of the project, approximately 30 percent of the rising ninth graders from the middle school were sent to a newly built high school in the area, and the closed school system was lost for the duration of the project.

A majority of the work force of the 20,000 or so citizens of Greer work in textiles and other marufacturing concerns. The percentage of adults in the project community with below an eighth grade education is approximately sixty with a substantial number of functional illiterates included among them. The students in this region have historically performed at levels of one or more grade equivalents below the national average on all content areas of standardized achievement tests.

The major thrusts of the PSP center around community involvement, individualized education, the open school, differentiated staffing, affective education, and ongoing evaluation. Concepts and methods were borrowed and adopted from such already tried innovations as the Wisconsin Research and Development

Center and Kettering Foundation programs of Individually Guided Education (IGE), Glasser's Schools Without Failure, and various open education schools from the United States and Britain. Community involvement was effected by means of Educational Cooperatives and an Educational Cooperatives Board consisting of representatives from virtually all lay and professional organizations (formal and informal) located in the Greer Community. Ongoing evaluation is provided by two on site teams: Level I, which works for and reports to the project, and Level II, which works for and reports to ESP/NIE in Washington. The rest of this paper will deal with different aspects of the Level I evaluation operation of the Piedmont Schools Project.

## PSP Level I Evaluation

### The Team

The School District of Greenville County does not presently have a research and evaluation division. One person functions as director of testing for the district and various other personnel perform independently in roles which typically are classified as research and evaluation. The PSP evaluation team cooperates with but is independent of all district offices. The PSP evaluation team is, by design, a multidisciplinary one. That is, the staff of five under a Director of Level I Evaluation consists of one educational researcher/evaluator, one experienced teacher/editor, one sociologist, one communications/graphics specialist, and one computer programmer/data analyst. A full time secretary is employed to keep up with the team members and to type, reproduce, and disseminate all of the reports they generate. The multidisciplinary approach was chosen in an effort to bring to bear on a complex undertaking the varying perspectives which could be provided by staff members of different training and experience. After over three years of operating as a team, staff members are convinced that the idea is a good one and that they have generally complemented one another in their

evaluation efforts. While the staff members have attended national and regional evaluation symposia and workshops, most of their evaluation training has been on the job.

Responsibilities and Activities

The specific charge of responsibility for the Level I team is to provide timely, meaningful information to educational decision makers. The PSP interpretation of who is an educational decision maker is very broad and include the following: student groups, community groups, teachers, principals, resource coordinators, area office personnel, district office personnel, and ESP/NIE personnel.

The approach used by the PSP evaluation team in carrying out its charge is largely two-fold: active (planned) and reactive. In the active realm, for instance, standardized test information is provided to the decision makers twice yearly. The information consists of achievement, aptitude, affective, and psychomotor data collected in the fall and spring. The testing plan permits both cross-sectional and logitudinal analyses to be made. That is, five grades are tested every year and a group of the same students are tested as second, third, fourth, and fifth graders. Another group is tested as sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, and still another group as ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelth graders. Every effort is made to put the spring data into the hands of the teachers and administrators by the late summer so that they can use it to help plan for students coming to their schools and classrooms in the fall. All of the standardized information gathered on PSP students is also gathered on control group students. The control group schools were chosen on the basis of I.Q. and achievement data, school size, black/while ratio, type of community and type of program. A high school, a middle school and four elementary schools in the South area of the district were selected as control schools.

In an effort to make test results more meaningful, a seven-point scale was developed for reporting all results. The Descriptive Category Scale (DCS) is statistically based upon the normal distribution (similar to the well known STANINE scale) and uses the language that most teachers and lay persons use in describing students' aptitude or achievement levels: Very High, High, High Average, Average, Low Average, Low, Very Low. The DCS score reports are broken out by content area with summaries for the principal, content area resource coordinators, and area administrators. Student listings are provided for the teachers.

The PSP Level I evaluation team is very much involved in all aspects of testing in the eight schools which make up the project. Not only do they coordinate and administer the standardized achievement and aptitude tests required by the state, school district and project, but they also provide materials and assistance for the special testing needs of teachers and administrators within any school. They assist, for instance, the classroom teacher in developing better teacher made tests and provide free test scoring and item analyses for those tests which lend themselves to an objective, machine scorable format.

In less time than it takes for the teacher to drink a cup of coffee, they can score by machine up to one hundred objective tests with up to one hundred and fifty items and return them to the teacher. An item analysis report consisting of the number and percentage of students selecting each alternative for each question is returned to the teacher twenty-four to thirty-six hours after the Level I team receives the answer sheets.

In addition, the evaluation staff conducts large and small group, as well as individual, test score interpretation meetings and workshops. The staff presents test information in summary formats with graphics and examples designed to make the use of the data as clear and explicit as possible for the classroom teacher, the principals and the area office staff. While most of the services mentioned here are provided for PSP and control group schools only, the Level I

evaluation team does score tests and provide technical assistance in evaluation design, surveys, etc., for the district office and all district schools that time and resources permit.

Level I is committed to the idea that test scores should reflect, as accurately as possible, the student characteristics for which the tests were designed. For that reason, they have prepared an inhouse booklet on "How to Win at Test Taking." The booklet is meant to be used by the classroom teacher with his or her students. It contains no magic formulae, but consists of a few simply stated, common sense suggestions designed to optimize a student's performance on any standardized test.

Operating on the assumption that such things as "test wiseness" or "test taking skills" do exist, the booklet also includes a series of brief, fun-to-take tests which are administered in the typical standardized test fashion. These practice tests cover content areas such as current rock music, television shows, sports, movies, simple vocabulary, spelling, and arithmetic. They are designed so that every student should be able to do well on the test while learning the proper skills necessary for obtaining valid results from standardized tests.

In addition to the testing aspects of the active realm, the evaluation team also conducts and directs various questionnaire and interview surveys at planned times during the year. The PSP is committed, for instance, to transferring the successful components of its operation to the other schools in the district and Level I evaluation administers pre and post surveys to faculty groups in an information and acceptance phase and an implementation phase. Also, working with the Educational Cooperatives Board, the evaluation team directs an interview survey study of parents of students in the schools and other community members. The Community Survey attempts to determine if the community still thinks that the original project goals and objectives are important and to what extent improvement has been made toward reaching those goals and objectives. The information

from this survey is used by project and school administrators to make decisions about program and process changes.

The reactive efforts of the Level I team are, in many ways, the most rewarding to the evaluation staff. When any person or group identifies a problem, program or project for which they need evaluation or informational help, the Level I team assists them, if it is at all possible. Perhaps the greatest benefit derived from these evaluation efforts is the increased awareness, on the part of those requesting assistance, of the importance and usefulness of evaluation information. Such awareness is a natural concomitant to the pride of ownership and vested interest which comes from jointly working to solve a common problem. The school personnel working with the evaluation staff are also developing competencies and skills which they can apply to their daily school and classroom operations.

It is important, for instance, for teachers and administrators to discover or verify that in large groups the small, vocal minority does not necessarily reflect the true feelings, opinions or wishes of the majority. A well planned, jointly worked out opinionnaire or questionnaire survey is frequently a better way of determining the importance of a question or issue than is listening to one or two irate and vocal parents, students, or teachers. The people working on such a survey begin to better understand the hard work, care and precision which goes into gathering valid information when polling a given population for its opinions and/or ideas.

As an example, one important aspect of the PSP program is participative management; i.e., the people who are to be affected by a decision have an opportunity to provide input into the decision making process. This opportunity is effected in numerous ways; there is a school Instructional Improvement Committee (IIC), a project-wide IIC, an Educational Cooperatives Board (representing the diverse lay and professional groups of the community), and a Curriculum Steering Committee. The membership of these groups is determined by election or appointment,

but many members feel the need to find out what the larger group they are representing thinks or feels about some important issue or decision. Some advantages of using the survey approach to get this information are that, in most instances, the respondents know that their answers are anonymous, the entire group which will be affected by the decision has an opportunity to be heard from, and a true majority opinion can be obtained.

An example of a reactive study that involved both a standardized test and a tailor made questionnaire was a study jointly requested by the Language Arts and Reading Resource Coordinators and the English department at the PSP high school. Recognizing that students in all grades read at different grade levels, this group requested that Level I help administer and score a standardized reading test to every student at the high school. The results of this test were used to determine what the reading level was of every high school student.

In conjunction with the reading test the requesting group, working with Level I, constructed a questionnaire designed to determine the reading interests of each student. The test scores and the interest survey data were used in planning individual reading prescriptions for students which included providing appropriate level reading material of high interest to the student.

The PSP Level I evaluation team has produced over 45 reports as a result of its active and reactive activities. The topics range from the high school student council requested study on what clubs and extracurricular activities the students were interested in and would support, to the yearly reports about the results of the affective, cognitive and psychomotor tests. In addition, many requests for data on attendance, suspensions, dropouts, expulsions, national Scholastic Aptitude Test score trends, school accreditation information, etc., have been responded to in modes other than formal, written reports. As the word spreads about the kinds of tasks the team can and does perform, the more requests for assistance they receive.

Problems Encountered

Perhaps the largest single problem encountered by the PSP Level I evaluation team was establishing rapport with its constituency. One such difficulty arose because of the negative connotations commonly attached to the word "evaluation." Teachers and administrators, especially, tensed up when the "evaluators" appeared. These professional educators seemed to be looking for the telltale forms, clipboards, and stop watches of the time and motion efficiency experts. These fallacious notions persisted for some time even though a lot of effort was expended in telling and showing the school people that evaluation was on their team and only wanted to help them do a better job.

The skeptical attitudes were, of course, understandable in that none of the people had ever had a team of evaluators poking around and "trying to help" before. It was, therefore, incumbent upon the evaluation team that they prove themselves to be a useful, positive force in the schools. The team had to educate the educators about internal evaluation. The biggest help in overcoming this problem has been in daily working with the teachers and principals in their schools and helping them solve their problems.

Another big problem in implementing an internal evaluation team was that goals and directions were frequently given in imprecise and ambiguous language which required a good deal of cleaning up before meaningful evaluation plans could be designed and implemented. It should be noted here that such problems stemmed as much from Washington as they did from local leaders. Constantly shifting goals and objectives make for extremely difficult, if not impossible, planning. The approach used by PSP Level I in solving (partially) this problem was to work very closely with the program people in helping them to rewrite the objectives in evaluation terms. By working together the original intent was maintained while the newly stated objectives permitted reasonable evaluation to be planned for and implemented. Involvement of evaluators in the pre-planning

and planning phases of the project would have taken care of this problem nicely. This problem is due in part to periodic personnel changes at the national and local levels. Sometimes it seems that old faces disappear and new ones appear with alarming frequency and regularity.

A lack of continuity naturally occurs when new ideas are imposed by new personnel. It is unreasonable, one supposes, to expect a new person to suppress his own enthusiasm and good ideas, especially when he has been hired because of those good ideas and that enthusiasm. It is unfortunately true, however, that such lack of continuity wreaks havoc on plans, programs, and processes.

The problem of continuity of personnel is very complex and there appear to be no workable solutions. How do you keep a good worker from being promoted, retired, or accepting a better job? Should you try? When political winds change is it reasonable to insist that the old political appointees be kept on? Does it really matter whether it is reasonable or not? One possible way to ameliorate the problem of changing personnel is to promote from within. In two of three key PSP administrative changes that is the approach that was used; the project's executive director was replaced by a PSP/Furman University liaison person and the retiring Director of Level I Evaluation was replaced by his senior staff member. PSP evaluation has been fortunate in that three of the original four staff members are still with the project as evaluators.

A related problem to that of changing personnel has been the history of the Level II evaluation team. Apart from the normal strain of having two evaluation teams on site (cautioned by ESP/NIE not to contaminate one another by interacting), was the problem created by the exit of the first Level II contractor. For one full year after the second year of operation of PSP no Level II team existed, which meant that Level I had to gather all of the data for its plan and all that was required by NIE/ESP. By the start of year four a new Level II team was present with a new plan and new impositions on Level I. At last Washington said to cooperate and collaborate, and they have. With a vengence. The difficulties are only

slightly alleviated by the addition of a Level I staff member and funds to be used for carrying out Level II activities. Fortunately, the new Level II team members are competent and fairly easy to work with.

Gathering information almost always precedes processing data and that can get to be a problem. If the sample size gets very large and the instruments are lengthy, the time between gathering the data and generating the reports becomes inordinately long. Information that is not timely is worthless for formative purposes. The district obtained a relatively small, low core, single channel computer about eight months after the start of the project. Until that time most data was processed by electronic calculator. Very big data analyses were farmed out to universities with large computers and canned statistical analysis packages. After the district obtained a computer a member of the Level I staff helped the computer center develop statistical programs within the limitations of the machine configuration. That process is still going on with the recently (Fall 1975) acquired larger computer. A full time programmer/data analyst has been added to the Level I team. Time and personnel problems still dictate that very large jobs be done at large university or commerical sites, however.

One additional problem in conducting evaluation in the schools is that of a communications gap. Evaluation reports must be free of technical jargon. Clear, concise, simple sentences must be used. Lengthy, complex reports are good for one thing--gathering dust. Evaluators must know the audience to which they are speaking and must speak in their language.

## Conclusions

It is the considered judgment of the author that an on-site formative evaluation team can contribute a great deal toward the success of an innovative project or an ordinary school district. Timely, valid information can significantly contribute to better decision making and more effective and efficient education.

There are problems, of course, but most of them can be resolved to the satisfaction and benefit of all concerned. One of the most encouraging things to happen from PSP is the plan to move the Level I evaluation team concept to the district, where all of the students and schools in the county will be served.